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February 2006

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Recommended Citation

Niyozov, S., Shamatov, D. (2006). Researching education and society in Central Asia. *Quality in education: Teaching and leadership in challenging times*, 2, 807-811.

Available at: http://ecommons.aku.edu/book_chapters/88

Researching Education and Society in Central Asia

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Introduction

Although researching of and publishing on different aspects of the society in Central Asia and the post-Soviet world has become a popular activity in the international context, little attention is paid to the concept, processes, and conditions of researching in Central Asia itself. Yet, the quality of the research outcomes, which depend on the above factors, and which constitutes a foundation for policy and practice decisions, including in education is of paramount importance. This paper is about themes, concepts, issues and challenges involved in the process of understanding and carrying out research in Central Asia. It draws upon the outcomes of a number of experiences, namely: (a) the presenter's personal experiences of conducting research in Central Asia, (b) interviews and informal conversations with a number of scholars involved in studying education and society in Central Asia, and (c) review of literature on research. The concepts and processes of researching are connected with literature on Soviet and post-Soviet research conditions. The paper highlights implications for the quality of research products, researching capacity, conditions of researching, and for training local and external researchers to undertake qualitative inquiry in Central Asia. Writing a paper on the challenges of educational research in Central Asia is a challenging task for a number of reasons, the most important of which is the dearth of reliable and valid data due to the underdeveloped research tradition in Central Asia, the lack of research facilities, critical scholarship and a lack of confidence in sharing the research data for identifying solutions to the problems.

Research in Soviet Central Asia

During the Soviet times, the very little research on Central Asian education was conducted via Institutes of pedagogical research and departments of pedagogy and psychology in Higher Education Institutions. These used to be divided into two types: Training or education institutions and research scientific research institutions. Most of the research used to be conducted by the Moscow Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, which had ordained to be the sole authority in policy recommendations, educational change and innovations across the Soviet Union (Suddaby, 1989). As a result, in the Soviet era, advanced research on education,

curriculum policy discussion, and textbook preparation were for the most part done in Moscow, where most specialists with advanced degrees in pedagogy and academic disciplines were located. Thus, the research capacity in education, as in all fields, was relatively underdeveloped for the population of the republic. Curricula used in Central Asia were largely identical to those developed in Russia for the Russian SFSR.

Soviet-era scholarship has been criticized for its highly-politicized backdrop and reductionist projections (Brigel, 1996). Educational research was possibly the least developed area. It was formally guided by behavioural psychology and Marxist positivist epistemology, which was exhibited in the form of quantitative statistical analyses and quantified sociological surveys, aimed at proving and verifying Soviet educational theories and models underpinned by the Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism (Tillet, 1969). The pages of the local teachers' periodicals such as the journal of *Soviet school* and paper of *Teachers' Newspaper*, were usually filled with the translated directives of the communist party and examples of best practice, represented through opinion papers of the best teachers. These voices, though important, were filtered so as to avoid controversy and complexity and remain in line with Party directives. This trend at filtering, cover-up, and selective use of data has continued in the post-Soviet times. Thus, Soviet research studies were shaped by ideological imposition (Glowka, 1992) and often represented personal political interpretations rather than conclusions based on rigorous empirical fieldwork.

There is a paucity of in-depth studies of teachers in developing countries (Avalos, 1993). Most studies on teachers and teacher development are still conducted in the Western context and scholarly traditions, and mainly by Western scholars (see Vulliamy et al., 1990). Central Asian states are experiencing dramatic changes that make its case especially different from other developing countries; the changes are more rapid, more radical and more complex (Heynemann, 1998; 2000; Niyozov; 2001). Researchers have yet to conduct in-depth ethnographic studies with and about individuals in countries experiencing the transition from socialism to free-market democracies, focusing on how that transition effects the teachers' development (Reeves, 2003). Ball and Goodson (1985) comment that teachers are generally viewed as merely shadowy statistical figures on the educational landscape; any information on them, their views and their practices is amassed through large-scale school surveys only. Likewise, teachers in the former USSR were commonly studied and portrayed via conventional quantitative methods. Niyozov (2001) asserts, "The actual voices of the teachers and educational stakeholders are virtually fully absent" (p. 434) in the Soviet period studies.

Post-Soviet Research

The post-Soviet period revealed a lack of skills in policy-making, ineffective information management, and non-participatory governance, as the major hurdles to the kind of management needed to move Central Asian education system out of its current malaise (ICG, 2003a; ICG, 2003b; WB, 2003). These shortcomings are pointed out frequently by external NGOs, without an analysis of the internal Soviet debate on education, or of the systemic factors leading to them (Landa, 1975; Skatkin & Kraevskii, 1981; Lysenkova, Shatalov, Volkov, Karakovskii, Shchetinin, Il'in & Amonvashvili, 1986). Largely based on surveys, group discussions, and statistical data; while being geared towards the needs, interests and preconceptions of donors and the international community; at the same time being led by comparative methods, the majority of these reports illustrate generalized trends and directions in education, whilst leaving out depth, complexity, issues and challenges that usually emerge from theorizing and discussions based on qualitative studies.

There is a shortage of mature senior researchers in the field of education, who are holders of degrees in education higher than the master's level, and are based in Central Asia. There is also no institution in the Republic of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that grants doctoral degrees in education, and can prepare the next generation of educational researchers and play a leading role in independent research on educational policy. Thus, these two shortages may lead to a continued dependence on outside expertise and research agendas in the formation of curriculum and the development of textbooks. Finally, policy makers may seek solutions to the current dilemmas of education policy from among the repertoire of known policy options that have been debated and even attempted within the history of Soviet education. As an example, the government recommends that schools in Tajikistan engage in agricultural activity involving children, for example, in the gathering of medicinal herbs for sale (UNESCO, n.d.). While largely inspired by the financial crisis of the educational system, such policies hearken back to the Soviet curriculum theory, which has at all times emphasized unity of theory and practice and the application of study to labour; on several occasions requiring children to learn practical skills through practical activity, such as keeping class garden plots. In the 1920s, it even affiliated many schools with actual enterprises (Holmes et al, 1995).

The consequences of the above discussion for educational research and practice in contemporary Central Asia are several. First, there is a shortage of skilled researchers, research centers, and conditions conducive for researching and dissemination in Central Asia. Without major development in these areas,

Central Asian states may remain dependent on outside expertise in the formation of education policy, curriculum and textbooks development.

There is a requirement for a needs-analysis of the current state of social research in Central Asia. It was noticed that there was very limited pool of scholarship resources and professional capacity to deal with the challenges of designing and conducting social research. So far many local scholars are involved in data collection and the transcription of outside researchers only. The role of the local scholars, who did the preliminary work, was not defined in the further processes. There is also a further need for developing local research capacity and for producing knowledge and research reports distinguished by quality and rigor that provide feedback to the work.

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